

# **TOWARDS A BETTER WRITING COURSE: INTRODUCING PROCESS WRITING INTO A POLISH CLASSROOM**

## **1. Introduction**

The writing course at the English Department of the Jagellonian University is based on principles found in two approaches to writing:

- genre
- process.

The genre approach focuses on the characteristics of the product and the generic characteristics of writing within different communicative events. Consequently, the writing instruction relies on understanding writing as communication, which assumes writers' constant awareness of the purpose of their writing and of the audience characteristics. The process approach emphasises the cognitive and composing processes which make the production of written composition possible. Multiple drafting in response to the teacher's and peers' feedback is essential.

In order to cope with the initial problems caused by the introduction of the new approach to teaching writing, we conducted a survey into the writing practices taught in Polish secondary schools. The purpose of the survey was to identify the writing practices with which secondary school graduates enter the academic environment. The findings of the survey are to help university teachers to design an appropriate writing syllabus with special emphasis on the differences between the approach students are familiar with and the approach they are going to encounter in the academic writing course.

## **2. Method**

The survey was conducted in October 1999 among 182 graduates of Polish secondary schools, all of them students of the English Department of the Jagellonian University in Kraków. There were 61 first-year students, 66 second-year students and 55 third-year students. They graduated from secondary schools between 1995 and 1999. They represented a variety of backgrounds, from small towns to large cities. 31 students (17%) were male, 151 (83%) were female, which is a typical ratio for language students.

The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire consisting of 17 questions (yes/no, multiple choice, open question) referring to students' experience of writing in secondary schools. The questions concerned various aspects of the writing task itself (what preceded and what followed it), the assessment criteria, the students' and teachers' attitudes towards the course as well as students' views on creative writing and possible ways of improving the course. It should be remembered that the writing instruction is not a separate course in Polish secondary schools; it is an integral part of the Polish literature course and, naturally, the topics are almost exclusively based on literature.

### 3. Results

For the majority of subjects the writing task was preceded only by the explanation of the topic. Fewer than 50% were made familiar with the characteristics of the text type they were to produce. Fewer than 15% had an opportunity to get acquainted with sample texts or to discuss the stages of their individual work on the task. Fewer than 8% worked on the outline of the text with the teacher and peers in class; about 4% had the experience of collaborating with peers on sections of the text in class. As to the instructions for the writing task, again for most subjects they were limited to the topic itself. For only about one third the length of the text was specified but, what is interesting from an English perspective, it was given as a threshold (e.g. at least 2 pages) rather than a limit (not more than 300 words). This brings up the question of the general attitude towards the size of the text. Nearly 70% of respondents agreed that there was a common feeling (though never explicitly formulated) that the longer the text, the better impression it made on the teacher. The specification of the audience the text was meant for was hardly ever included in the instructions (4%).

Students' major difficulties in writing were lack of interest in the topic (52%), finding ideas and materials (36%) and structuring the text (23%). A small group (15%) had problems with the language (finding adequate words to express their thoughts); very few (5%) found it difficult to choose the appropriate register of the language (possibly because most of the tasks did not require different registers).

The question "Who read your texts?" showed that about one third of the students wrote for their teachers only. Nearly 37% felt that writing was a private matter between the student and the teacher and encouraging the class to read and discuss their paper would have been violation of this privacy. Half of them showed their texts to peers and over 60% felt that reading peers' papers could help them in developing their writing skills. However, it was mostly the content of some peers' papers that they found helpful. Peer feedback as such was not practised.

When asked about the assessment criteria used by the teacher, students gave inconsistent answers. Although for only 36.8% of respondents the criteria were well known and clear (for 42.3% they were known but unclear, for 23.6 they were unknown), nearly all of them were ready to specify the proportions of particular components (content, structure, language use) in their teachers' assessment scale. Their specifications, though, are too varied to show any general tendency. What is confirmed in the

answers to more open questions is that the value of the language was very high and a few spelling errors could disqualify a text with a good content and structure. The additional criteria that were used by the teachers were originality, views (the same as the teacher's were appreciated), the student's reputation (good students received good grades), the aesthetic quality of the paper. In most cases (74%) teachers evaluated the papers by writing the grade and commentary. However, frequently the commentary was meaningless; it did not deal with the problems; it did not suggest how to improve the text; it did not justify the grade. The majority of teachers (80%) made general comments on all papers in class; in one third of cases the author of the best paper was asked to read it out in class. 32.4% of students had the opportunity to discuss their papers individually with the teacher. In over 35% of cases teachers did not require students to revise their papers. If they did, it was mainly (43%) language errors that had to be corrected.

As to creative writing, over half of the students (52.8%) had the experience of dealing with such topics (e.g. "Make up a different ending to the novel", "Interview the characters from the novel", etc.). When asked whether creative writing should be included in the secondary school curriculum, over 86% answered "Yes" claiming that

- it develops imagination,
- it is more interesting,
- it is fun,
- it will help to appreciate the value of literary works,
- it allows one to understand characters from books better,
- it is better because one cannot use ready-made "cribs",
- it allows one to show one's skills better,
- it will help to discover gifted students.

Although some sample topics were given in the question, it turned out that to a number of students creative writing equals "creative thinking" and expressing one's own views as opposed to reproducing others' views.

The remaining 14% of the students were either unsure whether creative writing should be taught or accepted it only as an optional course. The arguments against were that

- students who do not have interesting ideas receive worse grades although their texts are well written in terms of the structure and language;
- creative writing interferes with "serious writing";
- it is difficult to have clear assessment criteria;
- in Poland it is considered simple and childish, so it should be practised only in the primary school.

Finally, the students were asked to suggest three changes in the secondary school writing curriculum. The most general suggestion was that there should be more writing (more assignments, different text types, more work on writing tasks in class). Some of them admitted that they had had very little experience of writing (1–2 papers a year) because teachers claimed they had no time to read more papers and in some cases the papers were not read at all. Other suggestions grouped by particular aspects are summarised in the following table:

INSTRUCTIONS	more specification: – text type – length – audience
TOPICS	– more choice – not only based on literature – invented by or consulted with students
CONTENT	– original – different views – concise (eliminating waffling)
PRE-WRITING ACTIVITIES	– generating ideas in class – conferencing with teacher – first draft discussed, not evaluated – peer feedback
ASSESSMENT	– each paper read and evaluated – papers discussed individually with students – each paper revised – clear general criteria so that students do not write to please a particular teacher – different teachers – a larger assessment scale – quality not quantity appreciated – length not specified (individual predisposition) – separate grades for content, structure and language (language errors should not disqualify an otherwise good paper) – teacher's commentary not only critical but also appreciating the strengths and giving directions for revision – papers not signed so that the teacher does not adjust the grade to the reputation of the student
TEACHER'S ROLE AND ATTITUDE	– friendly – wishing to help rather than just point out the weaknesses

It was noticeable that third-year students' suggestions were the techniques used in their writing course at the English Department (e.g. multiple drafting, peer feedback, assessment criteria), which showed their appreciation of the new approach.

#### 4. Discussion

The data presented above suggest the following general characteristics of the writing instruction that secondary school graduates have received and the writing practices they bring into the tertiary level of education:

1. Writing instruction is part of a content course (Polish literature) and the primary purpose of writing is to display knowledge. As a result, writing is not perceived as a separate skill that needs to and can be developed.
2. Instructions for the writing task are practically limited to the topic, which students deal with according to some conventions (their own prior experience, available sample essays) or their intuition. They seem to be appreciated for originality but, at the same time, punished for "different views".
3. The word limit does not exist. As a result, students are unaware that the size of the text is an integral part of the writing task (also in the real world) and it conditions the content, style, structure, etc. Moreover, wordiness or even waffling (saying the same in a number of ways, enumerating synonymous phrases, repetition, using pompous clichés) seems to be encouraged or appreciated, which particularly clashes with the discipline of writing in English.
4. Audience awareness is not developed. The only audience that students have in mind is the teacher and their purpose in writing is to satisfy a particular teacher rather than to fulfil the requirements of a particular task.
5. Since there is so little specification of the writing task, the assessment criteria are not well specified either. Frequently, the importance of the language (surface errors that can be eliminated at the level of editing) is overestimated. Used to this approach in L1, students are confident that language correctness is the primary assessment criterion in L2.
6. The teacher's role is limited to assigning the task and evaluating the product. Students are not required to respond to feedback and revise their papers. Conferencing is hardly ever practised.
7. Writing is perceived as a personal matter rather than a group activity. There is no practice of sharing ideas, collaborating on the text and taking advantage of peer involvement.

## 5. Conclusion

As can be easily seen, the basic principles of genre/process approach are quite different from what the students have been used to so far. On the one hand, they have to learn to perceive writing as communication set in meaningful contexts; on the other, they have to develop new techniques of working on the text both in and out of class; (the writing course does not consist in one-draft assignments any longer). While the first may be a relief (a better specified writing task is easier to approach and entails much clearer assessment criteria), the latter could be a serious challenge, especially the need (or ideally the desire) to share their work with peers and to offer and benefit from meaningful peer feedback. The role of the writing teacher is different, too. She is a coach rather than a mere evaluator. She intervenes in the writing process involved in a particular task in order to help the student produce a better text.

Evaluation questionnaires used by the writing teachers at the English Department show that students generally appreciate benefits of the genre/process approach, although they find it difficult at the beginning. After all, they have got used to particular

writing practices over twelve years of education. The results of the survey should be helpful in understanding students' initial difficulties and, possibly, in adjusting the classroom techniques and teachers' expectations.

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